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IN BRIEF

An Information Digest From ERIC/CAPS
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THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR: ELEMENTARY LEVEL

School counselor roles seem to have run the gamut: they're all things to all people; they're miracle workers; they're only record-keeping and scheduling clerks; they own the guidance program. When researchers look at role perceptions and actual vs. ideal roles, they find both consensus and conflict (Bonebrake & Borgers, 1984; Furlong, Atkinson, & Janoff, 1979; Locke, 1978). Variations in role and role perceptions may occur not only between districts and states, but among different groups within a school community and from school to school within a system. Current concerns for accountability and the economic bottom line further complicate attempts at counselor role definition.

Focus of This Digest. This Digest attempts to bring some clarity to the issue by focusing on the definition of the school counselor role at the elementary level. Middle/junior high and high school levels are the subject of separate Digests. In all three, the beginning and concluding sections are the same: the "developmental" role of school counselors, K-12 comprehensive developmental guidance, and counselor role essentials. Additional sections in this Digest cover elementary developmental guidance, the counselor role in elementary guidance, and a representative list of role/function descriptions.

Developmental Role of School Counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (1981, 1984) has defined the role of school counselors as "developmental," an approach based on models of the developmental psychology of children and adolescents, and on planned interventions to assure school-life success. This approach emphasizes a proactive, facilitative counselor role in fostering the learning and growth of all students, as opposed to crisis management, trouble shooting, therapeutic counseling, or advisement for the few. The major areas of developmental need which determine counselor interventions are personal, social, academic and career.

K-12 Comprehensive Developmental Guidance. Counseling leaders regard statewide K-12 comprehensive developmental guidance programs as the most effective way to establish the developmental counselor role. This is broadly defined as providing structured developmental guidance through individual and small group counseling (aimed at both content and process needs); large group guidance (including classroom and curricular guidance); consultation with and inservice training of teachers; consultation with and education of parents; and coordination of related guidance services (ASCA, 1984; Brown, Lamm, & Peace, 1985). The implications for counselor training include renewed emphases on child and adolescent growth and development, group work, and consultation.

Elementary Developmental Guidance

Guidance at the elementary level, including preschool, is directed to young children's developmental stages, defined by leading developmental psychologist Erik Erikson as autonomy vs. doubt, initiative vs. guilt, and industry vs. inferiority. Other determinants include the importance of children's first home-to-school transitions and the organization of the school into single-teacher, self-contained classrooms.

Counselor Role in Elementary Guidance

Counselor roles in elementary developmental guidance include the following (ASCA, 1981):

1. Consult with teachers to plan and implement guidance activities, and to incorporate developmental concepts into instructional plans and the classroom environment, especially in the early grades. The purpose is to maximize the developmental benefits of individual children, and to prevent or reduce serious problems. Because elementary students are with the same teacher all day, the consulting role can have significant impact. Consulting approaches include mental health, behavioral, organizational development, and Adlerian-based (Umansky & Holloway, 1984).
2. Counsel, educate and/or consult with parents about child growth and development, family communication skills, and the parental role in encouraging learning. Through these efforts, the counselor becomes a principal liaison between home and school, a role all the more important for its potential to increase parents' involvement in their children's education. Research consistently demonstrates that this involvement leads to increased school support by both parents and the general public.
3. Cooperate with other school staff in the early identification, remediation or referral of children with exceptionalities or developmental deficiencies.

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List of Role/Function Descriptions

A representative list of elementary role/function descriptions is provided below (Furlong, et al., 1979). The study for which this list was devised confirmed earlier findings that counselors perceived counseling as the primary actual and ideal role, followed by consultation, pupil appraisal, parent help, and referral.

1. Counseling. Assists students through individual and small group sessions to understand and accept themselves, and to become responsible for their choices and actions.
2. Consultant. Works closely with administration and staff to meet individual student needs, including special programs and workshops.
3. Pupil Appraisal. Coordinates the accumulation, organization, and maintenance of confidential pupil files. Interprets this information to help identify students with special abilities and needs.
4. Parent Help. Holds individual and group conferences with parents and acts as a resource person on child growth and development.
5. Referral. Coordinates referrals to other specialists in pupil personnel services and agencies in the school and the community.
6. Program Planning. Coordinates activities of school personnel, parents, pupils, and community in planning and developing the guidance program.
7. Career Development. Coordinates and implements a career awareness program, including curriculum suggestions to teachers.
8. Change Agent. Attempts to change those aspects of the school environment that are detrimental to the development of the child.
9. Ombudsman. Acts as a spokesperson and advocate for the individual student.
10. Disciplinarian/Behavior Modifier. Acts as a resource person to the teacher by intervening to change the disruptive behavior of students.
11. Public Relations. Interprets guidance services to school staff, parents, and community groups through special programs and media.
12. Local Research. Coordinates research in the following areas: follow-up of graduates, the relationship between aptitude/achievement tests and academic performance, student population characteristics, and guidance systems evaluation.
13. Curriculum Planning. Coordinates the development of curriculum to meet the academic needs of students with special needs.
14. Screening. Coordinates interviewing of new students and parents prior to enrollment, including preliminary diagnostic testing.

Counselor Role Essentials

If counselors are to have a realistic and effective role, it is essential to (1) assess local needs and resources, (2) establish priorities and clear objectives, (3) build in evaluation procedures, (4) communicate with the school staff and school community, and (5) work closely with staff members as a cohesive team. Otherwise, counselors are at risk of becoming what they cannot and should not be: miracle workers, sole owners of the guidance program, or the school's administrative catch-all. Ultimately, the guidance program will be only as good as the support that parents and administrators give to it—especially to the role of the counselor as a professional facilitator/educator.

Resource Documents

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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet focuses on the school counselor role at the elementary level. It discusses the developmental role of school counselors, kindergarten through grade 12 comprehensive developmental guidance, and counselor role essentials. Also included are sections on elementary developmental guidance, the counselor role in elementary guidance, and a representative list of counselor role/function descriptions. (NB)

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